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Đổi Mới and the Globalization of Vietnamese Art[1]

When scholars first came to Vietnam to study contemporary Vietnamese society in the early 1990s, they were interested in the "new" globalizing Vietnam, the Vietnam that was opening its doors to the West. This was certainly the case in the visual arts with the earliest international writing on contemporary Vietnamese painting, by Jeffrey Hantover, published in the catalogue that accompanied *Uncorked Soul* (1991), one of the first post-Đổi Mới exhibitions of Vietnamese art outside of Vietnam.[2] In that essay, Hantover he quotes a Vietnamese author who says that "originality and diversity had begun to replace the monotony of collective, and more or less academic presentations."[3] He wrote that "Đổi Mới has promoted creativity in the plastic arts…Painters can (now) paint what they choose." For social scientists too, Đổi Mới signaled the end of socialism and the beginning of globalism. As Jayne Werner writes, "globally,

[1] This essay has been collaboratively expanded and developed from an earlier text by Nora A. Taylor titled "What is Đổi Mới in Art?" which can be accessed at Southeast Asia Digital Library, Northern Illinois University Libraries, http://sea.lib.niu.edu/whatisdoimoi. While the original essay problematizes the use of Đổi Mới as an art historiographical framework with primary reference to the 1990s in Hanoi, and concludes that substantial changes in artistic and cultural policies have yet to take place in Vietnam today, this co-authored version presents updated elements of discussion pertaining to debates about globalization in art history as well as a broader regional scope that addresses developments in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City through the first decade of the twenty-first century.

[2] Literally meaning "new change" and commonly translated as "renovation," Đổi Mới refers to the economic reforms adopted by the Vietnamese government in the late 1980s that transformed the centrally planned economy into a market economy with socialist orientations. As a marker of structural transformation, it gained favor among state officials as a way of describing real or alleged or desired change across all sectors of Vietnamese society. Much like the terms *Glastnost* and *Perestroika* employed in the Soviet Union toward the end of the Cold War, Đổi Mới is used in ways synonymous with détente, liberalization, open-door policy and freedom of expression.

[3] Jeffrey Hantover, "Contemporary Vietnamese Painting," in *Uncorked Soul* (Hong Kong: Plum Blossoms, 1991), p. 33.

Đổi Mới links and integrates Vietnam into the capitalist world order, a process which has been called 'globalization'."[4]

In the early 1990s, it was as if all writing on art centered on this image, the allegory of the once repressed and now suddenly free, liberated, and liberal Vietnam. Most critics and observers of Vietnamese art discussed Vietnamese paintings in these terms; it was as if all art reflected this fundamental change in society. Regardless of the theme or content of a painting, Vietnamese painting in the 1990s was about individualism, unleashed creativity, free expression and open emotions. Red buffaloes, street scenes, self-portraits and underwater life, were popular subjects and all bore the qualifier of Đổi Mới whereas portraits of Ho Chi Minh, propaganda posters and farmers in the field - popular subjects in the 1970s and 1980s - were seen as signs of the old repressive and autocratic regime. Articles that appeared in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, for example, often centered on the reform process, the lifting of the iron curtain, the "modernization" of Vietnamese society. One such article followed a group of artists and poets. The journalist covering the story saw every move, every gesture by these artists and writers as indications of reform. As she witnessed their meeting in a café, she wrote "There was nothing subversive – or even unusual – about this gathering of Vietnamese artists and intellectuals… Nevertheless, this clubby, art-filled afternoon testifies to the liberalizing effects of Đổi Mới."[5] Outside observers thus saw all Vietnamese citizens as participating in a Đổi Mới process.

However, the assumed equivalence of Đổi Mới with a period of radical change in the cultural sector, and more particularly, as art historical periodization, is problematic. One may

[4] Jayne Werner, "Gender, Household and State: Renovation (Đổi Mới) as Social Process in Việt Nam," in Jayne Werner and Danièle Bélanger, eds., *Gender, Household, State: Đổi Mới in Việt Nam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2002), p. 30
[5] Sally Goll, "Art in the time of *Đổi Mới,*" *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7 May 1992, p. 36.

question if the adoption of a market economy in Vietnam necessarily translated into a radical refashioning of the arts considering that the political system and much of its controls have remained in place. While artistic subjectivities and practices in Vietnam have undoubtedly been significantly impacted following the emergence of a capitalist art market, it is unclear whether the term Đổi Mới – or even post-socialism, neoliberalism, or globalization - captures or let alone explains the emergence of this market nor the more complex developments that led to the rise of "contemporary Vietnamese art." Neither can it more definitively account for many of the changes observed across other modes of expression and cultural production in Vietnam, from music to literature and art.[6] What, if anything, does it mean to talk about Đổi Mới in the arts? Is it a style of music? A literary genre? A period in art history?

Discussions of "post-Đổi Mới" art further emphasize the challenges faced by Vietnamese artists in light of ongoing political conditions and cultural restrictions enforced by the Communist state, situating them as artists working within a late socialist or postsocialist condition. In much of the writing on Vietnamese art, Đổi Mới has served as convenient shorthand for signaling the temporality of contemporary art in Vietnam, providing a benchmark from which to describe not only the effects of global economic integration but also the corresponding transformation of the visual arts as responsive to new markets, international curatorial demands, contemporary economic, social, and ecological issues, and new media and mediums such as installation, performance, and video. While it may be tempting to draw comparison with Chinese artists on the basis of what Li Zhang has described as the two nations'

[6] Phạm Thị Hoài scrutinizes the notion of Đổi Mới as reform with reference to literature in "The Machinery of Vietnamese Art and Literature in the Post-Renovation, Post-Communist (and Post-Modern) Period," February 4, 2004, *UCLA Center for Southeast Asian Studies Occasional Paper Series*, http://escholarship.org/uc/item/79z98070, accessed 23 July 2018.

diverse forms of "flexible post-socialism" following their respective liberalizing reforms, as art historian Joan Kee has argued, a diachronic perspective should temper the view of particular artistic developments being tied to a singular historic moment.[7] Within a broader context, this retrospective framing corresponds to the art historiographical trend that periodizes contemporary art (typically in parts of the world once considered peripheral to the Euro-American map of modern and contemporary art) as consequential to major instances of transition or rupture. Contemporary art history in these instances is often designated by "post-" to situate experimental forms such as performance and installation as contextually driven responses and as historical effects. Examples include general framings of post-war or post-socialist, or more specifically historicized references such as post-Bubble Japan. In the last decade, the study of global contemporary art as a post-1989 phenomenon has been increasingly institutionalized in museological and academic practice, reframing a broader geographical expanse of art historical study informed by globalization studies and expanding the disciplinary remit to focus on such late twentieth-century phenomena as the rise of the curator and the proliferation of biennials. Conveniently pinned to such events as Tiananmen Square and the fall of the Berlin Wall, and exhibitions such as *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, the year 1989 here denotes a 'global turn' in the siting of contemporary art practices, and the growth of new institutional platforms and accompanying discourses that spurred interests in and markets for 'global' contemporary artists.

It has thus become commonplace in both Vietnamese-language and non-Vietnamese-language art historical writing to use Đổi Mới as a milestone, the beginning of a new era, with

[7] Joan Kee, "Why Chinese Paintings Are So Large," *Third Text* 26, no. 6 (2012): 651; Li Zhang, "Afterword: Flexible Postsocialist Assemblages from the Margin," *positions* 20, no. 2 (2012): 661.

most citing the year 1986 as pivotal.[8] However, while situating contemporary Vietnamese art within "the global turn" in contemporary art history, as well as within Vietnamese art history, the principle query of this essay is the function of Đổi Mới as a protean historiographical device that strategically serves national and international framings of Vietnamese contemporary art. Following historian Keith Taylor's appeal to examine the "surface orientations" of historical experience, beyond the scales of nation and region,[9] more localized and diachronic studies of artists, their practices, and their milieus complicate the assumption that Đổi Mới, if dated to the onset of market-oriented reforms in 1986, spurred contemporaneous and even developments in art worlds throughout Vietnam. As noted further in this essay, scholars working across disciplines including economics, religious studies, and anthropology have already noted how such assumptions confuse the pace of formal state pronouncements with developments on the ground, producing a vision of "Vietnam" as a unified place in which the economic reforms generated uniform and more or less intended effects. This article contributes an art historical vantage point onto how this characterization elides the considerable variations in conditions and

[8] See for example, Jeffrey Hantover and Francis Li, *Uncorked Soul: Contemporary Art from Vietnam* (Hong Kong: Plum Blossoms, 1991); Michael Thoss and Sabine Vogel, eds., *Gặp Việt Nam* (Berlin, Germany: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 1999); Natalia Kraevskaia, *From Nostalgia towards Exploration: Essays on Contemporary Art in Vietnam* (Hanoi: Kim Dong Publishing House, 2005); Boi Tran Huynh, "Vietnamese Aesthetics from 1925 Onwards," Unpublished PhD Doctoral Dissertation, Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney, 2005; Trường Đại học Mỹ thuật Hà Nội and Viện Mỹ thuật, *20 Năm Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam Thời Kỳ Đổi Mới, 1986-2006* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Mỹ thuật, 2007); Sarah Lee and Nguyễn Như Huy, eds, *Essays on Modern and Contemporary Vietnamese Art* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2009);. Joyce Fan et al., *Post Đổi Mới: Vietnamese Art After 1990: 12 May 2008 to 28 Sept 2008* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2008): Nguyễn, Quân, *Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam Thế Kỷ 20* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Tri thức, 2010); Caroline Herbelin, et al., eds., *Arts du Vietnam: Nouvelles Approches* (Rennes, France: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015).

[9] K W Taylor, "Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region," Journal of Asian Studies 57, no. 4 (Nov. 1998): 949-78.

responses to Đổi Mới observed across the country's diverse cultural and geographical topography.

To track localized mediations of Đổi Mới within processes of transformation enacted structurally and at the level of individual agency across comparative Vietnamese contexts, this essay focuses primarily on selected artistic developments that took place from the late 1980s through the first decade of the twenty-first century in the urban centers of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. These two locations have received the most curatorial and scholarly attention because they are the places where most Vietnamese artists live and where cultural policies have the most impact. Although an art school exists in the central city of Hue and there is a thriving tourist market for paintings and crafts in provincial cities, this essay limits its discussion to the sites that have been the subject of art historical studies since the founding of art schools in Hanoi and the southern provinces in the early twentieth century.[10] Although it will emphasize the relationship between art economies and art ecologies in urban centers, it is not meant to reiterate national narratives. Rather, it will look at how art historical discourses have followed national trends.

[10] The founding of the École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine in 1925 in Hanoi has been the subject of study in numerous works of scholarship. Prior to 1954, there existed in the south three provincial artistic institutions, a school in Thủ Dầu Một focused on the production of decorative woodwork and lacquer, a school in Biên Hòa training students in ceramics and bronze sculpture, and the school in Gia Định which provided training in industrial and ornamental drawing and printmaking. For more information regarding the establishment and curriculum of the French-established art schools in Indochina, see *Les Écoles d'Art de l'Indochine* (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1937), *Trois Écoles d'Art de l'Indochine* (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1931), Nadine André-Pallois, *L'Indochine: Un lieu d'échange culturel?: Les peintres français et Indochinois, fin XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Presses de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 1997); Nora Taylor, "The Artist and the State: The Politics of Painting and National Identity in Hanoi, 1925-1995," (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1997); and Caroline Herbelin, "Deux conceptions de l'histoire de l'art en situation coloniale: George Groslier (1887–1945) et Victor Tardieu (1870–1937)," *Siksacakr: The Journal of Cambodia Research* 12–13 (2011): 206–218.

THE 'ARRIVAL' OF VIETNAMESE ART: HANOI

Whereas most historians stop the clock and mark their timelines with the date 1986 as the turning point in Vietnamese contemporary history, for art historians, and others,[11] this date may not have any real significance. Officially, it was in 1987 that the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Communist Party issued a resolution to "renovate and enhance leadership and management and develop creative power in literature, arts and culture."[12] But many changes happened earlier, and later. Bùi Xuân Phái (1921- 1988), for instance, one of

[11] Anthropologists such as Philip Taylor also see 1986 as a less definitive milestone. After all, change occurred from the bottom up and reforms were institutionalized long after they were put into practice. He is also critical of what he calls Đổi Mới discourse. As he states "Casting Đổi Mới as a revolution in interpretation (of socialism) rather than conversion (to capitalism) paralleled the logic of the Reformation, as perhaps distinct from the European Enlightenment. In this mode, the past was not comprehensively dismissed, for the canon of Marxist-Leninist thought was 'renewed' by more faithful interpretation." Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam's South* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), pp. 61-62. Changes in the arts often have taken place outside of the state system before they were acknowledged by the state. This was also the case with economic reforms. As Benedict Kerkvliet and Hy Van Luong have argued in regards to the decollectivization of agriculture and commerce, it is often when a system fails, or production levels drop that the government considers experimenting with alternative policies. As Kerkvliet and Luong documented in villages near Hanoi, communal farms and enterprises began to see drops in production levels already in the late 1970s causing serious economic hardship and concern for the party. These difficulties occurred as the Soviet Union withdrew its economic aid and China launched military threats on the borders of Vietnam. The state was forced to look into methods of increasing production and came up with plans for gradual decollectivization. See Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, "Village-State Relations in Vietnam: The Effect of Everyday Politics on Decollectivization" *Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 2 (May, 1995): 396-418; Hy Van Luong, "Wealth, Power and Poverty in the Transition to Market Economies: The Process of Socio-Economic Differentiation in Rural China and Northern Vietnam," *The China Journal*, July 1998, pp. 61-93

[12] Summary of World Broadcasts, BBC, as quoted by Esta S. Ungar, "Media and Society: Sociocultural Change in Vietnam since 1986," in *Đổi Mới: Vietnam's Renovation Policy and Performance*, eds. Dean K. Forbes, et al. (Canberra: ANU Department of Political and Social Change, 1991).

the most celebrated figures among Hanoi artists and often cited as an underground or unofficial painter, was given his first public one-man show at the end of 1984 by the Vietnamese Fine Arts Association which was then called the Vietnamese Art Workers Association (Hội Nghệ Sĩ Tạo Hình), a branch of the Fatherland Front that operated an exhibition space in downtown Hanoi at 16 Ngô Quyền street. . For many artists in Hanoi, that event was significant enough to prove that all artists eventually receive proper recognition for their life's work, and this did not happen in 1986, but two years earlier. For other artists, an even earlier date, 1975, was the pivotal year for change when the war ended and they were able to meet their colleagues in the north or south for the first time since the colonial era. The late art historian Boitran Huynh-Beattie not only saw 1975 as having a bigger impact on Vietnamese art history than 1986, but saw 1990 as an even more significant date for change. As she stated: "The reform policy of 1986 did not bring about change, until the subsidized economic system finally collapsed in 1990."[13] Nora Taylor also emphasizes the need to see the post-war period in Hanoi as more significant than 1986.[14] If one is to consider that changes occurred in 1975 and 1990, then indeed Đổi Mới can neither be considered a singular nor a significant trigger for artistic reform.

In 1986, artists who wanted to sell their works still had to meet clandestinely in cafes and exchange their paintings and drawings under the table, literally, in exchange for a few bills of foreign currency, rarely dollars. Đặng Xuân Hoà (b. 1959), for example, once related how he and his friends would meet foreigners, Belgian health care workers, or Swiss diplomats at the home of Dương Tường (b. 1932). They would then agree to go to a certain café and drop off their work

[13] Boi Tran Huynh, "Vietnamese Aesthetics from 1925 Onwards," Unpublished PhD Doctoral Dissertation, Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney, 2005.
[14] Nora Annesley Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

or feign to forget it at a given table where an envelope with some money was waiting for them. In 1986, most artists belonged to the state sponsored Vietnamese Fine Arts Association. The only art gallery where artists could show their work was the government owned space on 16 Ngô Quyền street. Private galleries did not open until 1990. In 1986, it was still forbidden to exhibit nudes and abstract art. Art books in 1986 were still printed on newsprint. Color reproductions were rare. Art book publishing was reserved for the printing of national exhibition catalogue or monographs on the designated national treasures, artists who fought in the resistance against the French and helped shape national imagery.

In 1986, however, and not coincidentally, Nguyễn Quân (b. 1948) was named editor-in-chief of *Mỹ Thuật* (Fine Art) magazine. His tenure as editor marked a shift in the production and access to critical artistic discourse oriented toward modernist internationalism. Nguyễn Quân had begun to gain some recognition as an art critic, writer and painter in his own right. He studied mathematics in East Germany during the war and studied painting on his own. He never went to art school. Under his editorship, the magazine that had famously published guidelines for artists to paint "national sentiment" (*tính dân tọc*), was now featuring articles on Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris and Salvador Dali. He enlisted like-minded friends to join the team of art writers and critics, including Thái Bá Vân (1934-1999) and women artists Đặng Thị Khuê (b. 1946), Đỗ Thị Ninh (b. 1947) and Mai Sang (b. 1947). Looking at issues that date from 1986-1988, it appears there were very few articles on Vietnamese artists. The magazine seemed to feature more articles on international art and art historical movements in Europe than anything local or regional. A scattering of articles on Đông Sơn drums or Lý Dynasty temples appeared but very little on emerging artists from Vietnam. This lack of attention to the artists who created works favored by the establishment may have caused the artists' association that governed the publication to oust

Nguyễn Quân and his team in favor of Lê Quốc Bảo (b. 1934) in 1988.[15] So, while the magazine appeared to open the doors for art and introduce the art public to a variety of art forms and expression, two years later, the magazine returned to publishing articles about war heroes, the *Khóa Kháng Chiến* (Resistance class), and Soviet Socialist Realism.

In 1989, after leaving his editorial post, Nguyễn Quân collaborated with Phan Cẩm Thượng (b. 1957), a young graduate in art theory and history from Hanoi University of Fine Arts, on two publications, *Mỹ Thuật của Người Việt* (Art of the Viet) and *Mỹ Thuật ở Làng* (Art in the Village).[16] While these publications may sound like redundant nationalist histories of art, they in fact departed dramatically from previous publications on the history of art in Vietnam. Both publications trace the history of Vietnamese art to the village. Instead of drawing historical lines along the dynasties that ruled the country, the authors locate the sources of Vietnamese artistic traditions with the people and the villages, outside of the imperial sphere. This view of art history did not necessarily coincide with official views. Rather, they corresponded to the resurgence of village traditions after decollectivization. As Shaun Malarney documented in his research on the revival of village festivals after Đổi Mới, control over religious rituals loosened as the private economic sector began to thrive. That is, as villagers began to acquire more individual wealth, the demand for certain festivals and rituals increased and the State had little influence in controlling them. As he explains, "cadres could, through surveillance and innovative roles for officials in funeral rites, advance official ideology and its meanings for the rites, but

[15] There are no official or published articles that explain this editorial turnover. The authors relied largely on hearsay and conversations with Quân and others to substantiate these assumptions.

[16] Nguyễn Quân and Phan Cẩm Thượng, *Mỹ Thuật của Người Việt*, (Art of the Viet) Hanoi: Fine Arts Publishing House, 1989; Nguyễn Quân and Phan Cẩm Thượng, *Mỹ Thuật ở Làng* (Art in the Village), Hanoi: Fine Arts Publishing House, 1990.

they could not control the participants' application of their own meanings and ideas about proper organization to the ceremonies. Vietnamese state functionalism foundered on the vain hope of controlling an inherently ambiguous phenomenon."[17]

The early 1990s saw an amplification of village craft traditions such as ceramics and basketry, paper-making, and lacquer. This does not include what we can classify as fine arts such as painting and sculpture which were predominantly produced in the art schools and studios of the urban centers of Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Hue. As the economy prospered, so did the demand for luxury goods. After decades of state-controlled collective factories, families that had created goods for centuries prior to the revolution could return to their craft industries. The context of Nguyễn Quân and Phan Cẩm Thượng's books lie in the rejection of the state in favor of family-run artistic production. Their books, therefore, were far from promoting a nationalist view in the state sense, but rather, promoted a return to village artistic production. Their accounts were as patriotic as previous studies, they simply shifted the power of production from the government to the people. This idea, in many ways, was mirrored in the kinds of paintings that were being made during this time, many of which referenced the color palette and formal schemes of *Đông Hồ* woodblock prints. Village temple scenes, domestic objects, references to puppetry and folk tales were subjects that became increasingly popular in paintings as private enterprise began to rise.

Naming Nguyễn Quân the head of the official art magazine may have been an indication of the loosening of restrictions in art, but his replacement with a more conservative editor two years later showed that the cultural authorities were not ready to embrace liberalization in the

[17] Shaun Kingston Malarney, "The Limits of 'State Functionalism' and the Reconstruction of Funerary Ritual in Contemporary North Vietnam," *American Ethnologist* 23, no.3 (Aug.1996): 554.

arts quite yet.[18] Similar situations had occurred decades earlier in colonial and post-colonial debates over art for art's sake versus art for society as well as the controversies surrounding the 1950s publication *Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm,* when artists were punished for speaking out too freely but only after several issues had already been published.[19] In other words, it did not take a decision to be made by the state for artistic reform to take place. Nor was the decision necessarily the trigger. Rather, it merely signaled an authorization like any other for certain artistic forms to be recognized.

This included abstraction and nudity. Artists such as Bùi Xuân Phái mentioned above experimented with European post-impressionist styles of oil painting, street scenes and portraits of women, opting for art for art's sake instead of conforming to the socialist themed works hanging in the museum and Cultural Centers. Among the artists that came to be recognized as representative of reform, some are seen as "disciples" of Phái as they emulated his semi-abstract landscapes and penchant for figures set in colorful hues. Particularly representative of this tendency was a group of young male graduates from the Hanoi University of Fine Arts that called themselves "The Gang of Five." The group of classmates, consisting of Đặng Xuân Hòa (b. 1959), Hà Trí Hiếu (b. 1959), Trần Lương (b. 1960), Phạm Quang Vinh (b. 1960), and Hồng Việt Dũng (b. 1962) graduated in 1983, but it wasn't until 1993 that they held their first group exhibition at the Vietnamese Arts Association's 16 Ngô Quyên exhibition space, making their

[18] On the loosening and subsequent reinstatement of cultural constraints in the artistic sphere see Phạm Thị Hoài, in "The Machinery of Vietnamese Art and Literature in the Post-Renovation, Post-Communist (and Post-Modern) Period."
[19] Hue Tam Ho Tai, "Literature for the people: From Soviet Policies to Vietnamese Polemics," in *Borrowings and Adaptations in Vietnamese Culture,* ed. Truong Buu Lam (Manoa: University of Hawaii, Southeast Asia Paper no.25, 1987); Hirohide Kurihara, "Changes in the Literary Policy of the Vietnamese Workers' Party, 1956-1958," in *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s,* eds. Takashi Shiraishi and Motoo Furuta (Ithaca: Cornell University Press Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1992), pp.165-193.

official debut as a group. Their moniker was coined by the poet translator Đương Tường (b. 1932) whose house had become an unofficial gathering place for writers, composers and artists. Nguyễn Quân was a regular and, in many ways, was responsible for spearheading the kind of bold expressionism and colorful palette that became the signature Đổi Mới style.

Đương Tường's house was not the only home where gatherings took place. The self-taught artist Vũ Dân Tân (1946-2009) opened his home to his friends as a site for artists' workshops, talks and creative brain storming. Inspired by the social reforms that had taken place in the Soviet Union under the policy of Peretroika, in 1990, he and his Russian-born wife, Natalia Kraevskaia (b. 1952) opened Salon Natasha, the artist's childhood home on Hàng Bông street in the center of Hanoi. For its ten years of operation, Salon Natasha hosted a variety of art events that encouraged a group of young artists to experiment with different styles and materials outside of the mainstream. Salon Natasha was an open space in every sense of the word. The door was never closed. Both Tân and Natasha entertained international visitors, introduced them to local artists and fostered a wide network of relations. Because Salon Natasha and Đương Tường's house were spaces located in private homes, they were free of the requirements set forth by the government that permitted exhibitions only with their authorization. Unlike Salon Natasha, Đương Tường's house never held exhibitions but visitors who stopped by were sure to meet an array of artists, musicians and writers. Thus, they became desireable spaces to build a community. On the other hand,because Salon Natasha was located outside of State circuits, it was never included in studies of modern or contemporary art published in Vietnam. Thanks to the digitization of documents pertaining to Salon Natasha's activities sponsored by Asia Art

Archive in Hong Kong, Salon Natasha is being reconsidered as a site of artistic experimentation and reform in the last decade of the twentieth century.[20]

Another important figure in the Hanoi art world that helped a group of young artists to connect with the international art world is German artist Veronika Radulovic (b. 1954). Radulovic was the first international lecturer at the Hanoi University of Fine Arts from 1994 to 2000. Sponsored by the DAAD German Academic Exchange Service, she taught visual multi-media art, curated exhibitions and organized exchanges between German and Vietnamese artists. Radulovic introduced her students to the interdisciplinary art practices of international artists such as Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), Yoko Ono (b. 1933) and Christo (b. 1935). Although the contexts of these art works were different from the everyday realities of Vietnam, the freedom of expression, social commentary and diversity of practices that they suggested appealed to the generation of artists born near the end of the war with the United States.

CONTEMPORARY ART AND INTERNATIONALISM: HO CHI MINH CITY

In Ho Chi Minh City, the effects of the privatization of the art market and the loosening of cultural restrictions bore a more gradual impact on the visual arts in comparison with the more radicalized forms of art making witnessed in Hanoi in the 1990s, whether it be the pronounced painterly sourcing of vernacular iconography from the village or the performance and installation experiments of a younger generation of artists. Huỳnh Văn Mười (b. 1950), painter and chairman

[20] See the Salon Natasha archive on the Asia Art Archive web site: https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/salon-natasha-archive (accessed 23 July 2018).

of the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Association, likened northern artists' response to Đổi Mới to the rapid oscillation of a pendulum when pulled back too far, in contrast with southern artists' hesitation to publicly embrace rapid change after the short-lived "subsidy period" (*thời bao cấp*) from 1975 to 1986.[21] Indeed, much of the art scene in Saigon during this period appeared oriented toward the pursuit of continuity with the postcolonial wartime period under the Republic of Vietnam (1955-1975), in which artists were free to pursue international artistic styles in contrast to their colleagues in the north. During the postcolonial period, southern painters had experimented with a diverse range of styles, ranging from variations of abstraction to photo-realism. The term "Saigonese Modernism," used by Boitran Huynh-Beattie, refers to the expressive and experimental nature of a cosmopolitan art community in 1960s Saigon that was significantly shaped through the exchange between local southern artists and émigré northern artists who had relocated south with the partitioning at the 17th parallel in 1954.[22] This postcolonial modernism, which can be perceived as having participated in currents of internationalism across the visual arts, literature, and architecture,[23] was publicly truncated in 1975 with the unification of the country as a Socialist state, and consequently, the comparatively short-lived imposition of Socialist Realism as the only authorized mode of public artistic expression during the Subsidy Period.

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[21] Interview with Pamela N. Corey, Ho Chi Minh City, October 14, 2010.
[22] See Huynh, "Visual Arts of the Republic of Việt Nam (the South) 1954-75: The 'Other'," in "Vietnamese Aesthetics," p. 189-267.
[23] See, for example, the catalogue for the 1962 First International Exhibition of Fine Arts of Saigon, the city's marked attempt to stake a place within the international, in addition to recent scholarship providing more formal study of southern architectural modernism: *Đệ Nhất Triển Lãm Quốc-tế Mỹ-thuật tại Sài Gòn 1962 / First International Exhibition of Fine Arts of Saigon 1962* (Saigon: International Exhibition of Fine Arts of Saigon, 1962) and H. Hazel Hahn, "Rounded Edges: Modernism and Architectural Dialogue in Ho Chi Minh City," *ABE Journal: Architecture Beyond Europe* 11 (2017), http://journals.openedition.org/abe/3630 ; DOI : 10.4000/abe.3630

During the subsidy period in the south, artists continued to work privately in a manner of their choosing. Painter Nguyễn Trung (b. 1940) described how some artists would "follow the revolutionary road" (*suivaient le chemin revolutionnaire*) and adopt Socialist Realism as subject matter in order to continue to have opportunities to exhibit, as all exhibitions were organized by official associations administered through state ministries.[24] Trung himself took up subjects favorable to Socialist Realism as well as portraits of women; this was a way to make a living. In addition, it is possible to perceive the subsidy period as a productive period, despite its constrictions and dearth of resources, in that unification had enabled new forms of exchange between different populations. Although difficult to come by, one could attain materials, perhaps through unofficial networks; for example, some artists had previously hoarded materials in case there should be a shortage, and some returnees from abroad brought back materials and texts to share. Artist Đỗ Hoàng Tường (b. 1960) described how some painters would go abroad and bring back materials, and upon their return, groups would discreetly get together to socialize and check out the books, journals, and catalogues.[25]

Given the brevity of this experience compared with the longer period of constriction faced by artists in the north, the first significant changes in the southern art world following Đổi Mới were more tentative, as previously noted by Huỳnh Văn Mười. Notable developments that took place in the early 1990s were connected to painter Nguyễn Trung, who had played a prominent role in the 1960s Saigon art world, having won several juried exhibition awards and established the Society of Young Saigonese Artists. In 1964 Trung was imprisoned in Phnom Penh when he illegally crossed the border with the aspiration of traveling to France to pursue his

[24] Interview with Pamela N. Corey, Ho Chi Minh City, December 15, 2010.
[25] Interview with Pamela N. Corey, Ho Chi Minh City, October 26, 2010.

artistic studies. It was during regular visits from Buddhist monks at the prison that Trung took up a strong interest in Buddhism and the ways in which its philosophical tenets could be expressed through abstract painting. Trung returned to Vietnam and managed to achieve his dreamed-of Paris sojourn in the early 1990s, where he further developed a signature style of abstraction.[26] When Trung returned to Ho Chi Minh City in 1991, he resumed an important public role in shaping what might be considered the transition from modernism to contemporary art, or rather, picking up where the modernist project in Saigon had left off. This transition – or rather, re-articulation - may have had more to do with changes in language and discourse rather than in the art itself. In a study of twentieth and twenty-first-century Vietnamese art, Nguyễn Quân argues that a shift in artistic consciousness at the end of the 1990s can be evidenced through a recalibration of terminology denoting the change from the artist as painter (*họa sĩ*) to the artist as visual artist (*nghệ sĩ thị giác*), either demonstrating a new conception of contemporary art potentially indicating a growing diversity in artworks being produced at the time, or a changed notion of the artist as defined by a particular medium.[27] In terms of creating platforms for artistic discourse, in 1989 Nguyễn Trung - like Nguyễn Quân in Hanoi - took up the co-editorship of an art journal, *Mỹ Thuật: Tạp chí của Hội Mỹ Thuật Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh* (*The Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Association Journal*), in collaboration with fellow painter Ca Lê Thắng (b. 1949). Like its counterpart in the north, the journal played a strong role in stimulating discourse and debate through reports, reviews, translations, and editorial texts published in Vietnamese, English, and French. The journal sustained a longer shelf life in contrast to that of the Hanoi

[26] Nora Taylor and Boitran Huynh-Beattie, *Nguyen Trung*, unpublished monograph. Trung himself encountered few difficulties upon his return to Vietnam, despite his record, because he had attempted to leave the country under the regime of Ngô Đình Diệm, an act that was seen in a favorable political light.
[27] Nguyễn Quân, *Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam Thế Kỷ 20*, 126-30.

journal, holding steady in its co-editorship under Trung and Thắng until it ceased publication in 1998 due to financial constrictions. Like the journal steered by Nguyễn Quân, the Ho Chi Minh City journal provided a view to the international, featuring reports and translated essays on modern artists, such as Siqueiros and Picasso, to reviews of regional and international exhibitions of contemporary art, such as the first Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, Australia.[28]

And yet, in contrast to Hanoi, the southern journal's essays (by the editors and other contributors) also focused inward, with at times intensely self-reflexive commentary on the Ho Chi Minh City art scene and local developments, alongside coverage of what was happening in an avant-garde vein elsewhere in Vietnam. A recurring preoccupation was the situation of the arts in relationship to the changes wrought by a burgeoning art market and tourist industry, and the issue of quantity versus quality of works being produced and exhibitions being organized. In one editorial piece, Ca Lê Thắng reviewed the number of exhibitions held in Ho Chi Minh City in 1992, citing some 130 exhibitions featuring local, regional, and international artists. Đổi Mới and the Open Door policy had naturally encouraged further national and international cultural exchange and the growth of a private sector in the arts, but Ca Lê Thắng questioned whether this could be truly perceived as progress at the deeper level of artistic innovation and quality. According to Thắng,

> There exists in our city an irreconcilable paradox which is extremely dangerous to the development and future artistic foundations of the city, yet one where people are somehow gradually becoming reconciled to. This paradox is: disregarding the

[28] *Mỹ Thuật: Tạp chí của Hội Mỹ Thuật Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh* nos. 4 (May 1992); 8-9 (1993); and 12-13 (1994).

> artistic integrity and value of a gallery or work, art is exhibited for the sole purpose of selling pictures… This is the problem: we do not need a glut of exhibitions, but rather need to guarantee that each exhibition satisfies a few basic requirements, above all spiritual requirements – that the work be a 'noble feast' for the public's consumption."[29]

This question can be partially addressed by another venture involving Nguyễn Trung, that of the formation of the Group of 10, an informal name for a group of abstract painters, largely based in Ho Chi Minh City, who began to exhibit annually after the inaugural exhibition *Recent Works: 10 Artists from Ho Chi Minh City* in 1989.[30] Although the *Recent Works* series would switch out artists from year to year so that it was not necessarily a consistent "Group of 10" from 1990-1996, it was the impression that it was the first official artists' group to represent contemporary Saigonese art that gave its formation a sense of importance, and the style and perceived quality of the works rather than the official roster of artists that lent it prestige. Many of the painters featured worked in abstraction, and the May 1992 exhibition *Abstract Painting* further amplified the popularity of the annual exhibition of *Recent Works* and profile of its artists. Organized by the Hoang Hạc gallery in Ho Chi Minh City, *Abstract Painting* was the first

[29] Ca Lê Thắng, "Are we ready to step into the next age?" *Mỹ Thuật: Tạp chí của Hội Mỹ Thuật Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh* 7 (1993): 52-53.

[30] According to several of the artists involved, the group did not hold consistent "membership" throughout its duration until 1996. The 1995 exhibition brochure lists the following artists: Hứa Thanh Bình, Nguyễn Thanh Bình, Nguyễn Tấn Cương, Vũ Hà Nam, Trần Văn Thảo, Ca Lê Thắng, Nguyễn Trung Tín, Đào Minh Tri, Nguyễn Trung, and Đỗ Hoàng Tường. *Tâc phẩm mới: 10 Họa sĩ TP Hồ Chí Minh* (Recent Works: 10 Artists from Ho Chi Minh City) (Ho Chi Minh City: The Plastic Arts Association of Vietnam; Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Association, 1995). Pamela N. Corey's interviews with Nguyễn Trung, Đỗ Hoàng Tường, Nguyễn Tấn Cường, and Trần Văn Thảo, 2010-2011.

official and national exhibition of abstract painting to be held after Đổi Mới, featuring over thirty painters selected from Hanoi, Hue, and Ho Chi Minh City. This was a significant event in pronouncing the sanctioning of artistic expression away from the Socialist Realism directive that had governed artmaking in the public realm after 1975.

However conservative and even retrogressive abstract painting appeared to a younger generation of artists in the north who were engaging with more conceptual and in some cases, controversial, forms and subjects by the late 1990s, these exhibitions hailed a southern profile for Vietnamese painting, one that revisited Saigon's history of artistic modernism but pushed it in new directions as several painters, senior and junior, pursued it from the 1990s through the present. Several of the painters utilized abstraction as a means to master technique, drawing inspiration in large part from locally-sited observations, encompassing the changing cityscape and corresponding social issues in the face of Vietnam's entry into globalization.[31] According to a number of the participating artists, the community that took shape through these exhibitions was one founded more on social recreation rather than critical discourse; none of the artists interviewed were hesitant to describe it as such, rather, they all spoke to this as being an intrinsic characteristic of social life in Saigon – one of informality, freedom, and individuality.[32] The cultivation of a regional profile for southern Vietnamese art also paved the way for further purchase on the commercial art market, with such paintings finding eager clientele among

[31] Pamela N. Corey's interviews with Nguyễn Trung, Đỗ Hoàng Tường, Nguyễn Tấn Cường, and Trần Văn Thảo, 2010-2011.

[32] In regards to artistic discourse, painter Trần Văn Thảo drily asserted – as have most other artists from that generation – that the kind of debate over the arts that was and is prevalent in Hanoi had no parallel in Saigon, and that the extent of a critique might be "if beautiful, good; if not beautiful, then keep going" (*đẹp thì tốt, không đẹp, thì tiếp tục*). Pamela N. Corey's interviews with Nguyễn Trung, Đỗ Hoàng Tường, Nguyễn Tấn Cường, and Trần Văn Thảo, 2010-2011.

foreign collectors and local entrepreneurs seeking to decorate new hotels, restaurants, and offices.

However, it arguably wasn't until the first decade of the twenty-first century that Ho Chi Minh City began to be recognized as a global gateway to "Vietnamese Contemporary Art" alongside Hanoi. This was the result of numerous developments that had taken shape between 1997 and 2007, including the Ford Foundation-funded Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center, the integration of various diasporic artists who had decided to return and settle in Vietnam, and, perhaps the most internationally ambitious endeavor of all, the Saigon Open City biennial project.[33] Parallel to developments that had occurred elsewhere in Asia, e.g. China and India, the growing profile of southern Vietnamese diasporic artists in exhibitions abroad, such as Trinh T. Minh-Ha who exhibited at *Documenta 11* in 2002, and Dinh Q. Lê who had a solo exhibition at The MoMA in 2010, was a major factor in situating Vietnam on the map of "global contemporary art" for international publics.[34] With the expanding geography of biennials and triennials in tandem with the rise of China in the global market, curators interested in scouting

[33] Further details on these projects can be found in Pamela N. Corey, "Three Propositions for a Regional Profile: The History of Contemporary Art in Ho Chi Minh City," in *Arts du Vietnam: Nouvelles Approches* (Rennes, France: Editions Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015), pp. 135-144.

[34] In *Cruel Optimism*, Laura Berlant has described the prevalence of trauma theory in analyzing post-war subjectivity and social conditions and as a predominant means of "periodizing any crisis-shaped historical present (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011, p. 54). This has rung true for recurring curatorial frameworks not only for the exhibition of works by Vietnamese-born artists, but more generally within the world of post-1989 contemporary art, noted for its consumption of global crisis and cultural difference across an ever-expanding geographical purview. If one is to think "Vietnam" through contemporary art, it is thus no surprise that the most internationally renowned artists within the last two decades have largely been Vietnamese-American, such as Trinh T. Minh-Ha, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, Dinh Q. Lê, Tiffany Chung, and members of The Propeller Group, due to the imbrication of their work in discourses of migration, historical memory, and identity, and the conceptually sophisticated presentation of their work honed through postgraduate art education in the United States.

those lesser known regions of Asia that held appeal not in minor part due to their fraught politico-historical backdrops, also began to make more frequent visits to Vietnam, and particularly to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. International exhibitions such as *Post-Đổi Mới: Vietnamese Art After 1990* (Singapore Art Museum, 2008) and *Connect: Kunstszene Vietnam* (IFA, Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 2009-2010) reified and further popularized "Vietnamese Contemporary Art" as object of academic and curatorial investigation, market study, and as contributing to the broadening horizon of the global contemporary. Whereas in the 1990s writers may have framed Vietnamese art as emerging from the shadow of war thanks to Đổi Mới, in the twenty-first century contemporary art in Vietnam has been represented as accountable to both the post-war and post-socialist condition in the aftermath of Đổi Mới.

ARTISTIC REFORM, WHAT, HOW AND WHEN?

As previously discussed with reference to the work of other scholars working on Vietnam across disciplinary perspectives, the use of Đổi Mới to explain what appears to be a significant transformation in society at large is convenient but only tells part of the story. In art history, Đổi Mới should be seen as having played a part in facilitating and drawing out, rather than effectively triggering, a temporal juncture in which artistic subjectivity from the past and the present underwent transition. In terms of the art under study, perceived changes in style and form might be as much in the eye of the beholder as a reality. Sources and origins of change in artistic styles and movements are not easily documented. Certainly, when artists chose to follow a certain course, they may do so deliberately and consciously, and for a variety of reasons. Often,

however, changes occur unconsciously, inadvertently, or as a result of other changes, namely social, political and economic. Because of Vietnam's political history, it has often been assumed that artistic developments primarily reflect those of politics. But this may be a phenomenon of perception, a perception that changes have occurred when they may have not, wanting to see change in art when change has only taken place in society. While artistic policy underwent reform in 1987, this did not bring about immediate change in the arts. As scholars have documented, real changes occurred in the 1990s or even later, and some have even argued that not enough change has occurred.[35] But what kind of changes are these scholars talking about?

In terms of painting after Đổi Mới, while some paintings "looked" more expressionistic, it could be argued that the overall style of Vietnamese painting did not vary dramatically from one year to the next. All artists have their own signature, and styles vary from artist to artist. Whether in the north or south, some artists painted in ways that could be read as "expressionistic" and individualistic prior to 1987, while others continued to paint in ways that could be interpreted as conformist and academic after 1987. It is worth noting that earlier, in contrast to Socialist Realism in Mao's China or Lenin's Russia, Vietnamese Socialist Realism had been unified principally by subject matter, e.g. soldiers, farmers, scenes of revolutionary struggle, but had retained a diversity of individual techniques and stylistic expression through such mediums as lacquer and silk.[36] Effectively, artists had continued to use the techniques and

[35] See Huynh, "Vietnamese Aesthetics," and Nguyễn Quân, *Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam Thế Kỷ 20.*
[36] See Phoebe Scott, "Parallels and Divergence: Curating Modern Vietnamese Art in a Regional Context." *Arts du Vietnam: Nouvelles Approches,* ed. C. Herbelin et al. (Editions Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015), pp. 213-19, for a discussion of the instability of Vietnamese Socialist Realism as an aesthetic prerogative from 1945 to 1975. For examples of the remarkable spectrum of stylistic approaches to Socialist Realism in Vietnam, see *50 Năm Tranh Tượng Về Lực Lượng Vũ Trang và Chiến Tranh Cách Mạng, 1944-1994* [Fifty Years of Painting and Sculpture on Armed Forces and Revolutionary Wars] (Hà Nội: Mỹ thuật, 1994).

styles passed down from the colonial artistic educational system but adapted it to represent their subject matter. In other words, one cannot argue that all art changed as a result of political or economic reform. However, the context did.

As artists were able to sell their works in galleries and find a different patron for their sales, some of their choices of themes and styles may have been influenced by the tastes of their clients. More visible change occurred perhaps only in the latter half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, when video, performance and installation became more prominent. Vietnamese art writers also saw the year 2000 as a more definitive measure of change in two publications that appeared early in 2000 on art from the 1990s.[37] These writers considered the expansion in the artistic vocabulary and media available to artists as more groundbreaking than the changes in painting styles. This was further reinforced by the official introduction of the internet in 1997, while not so widespread until after 2000, enabled the effects of global networking, research, and new platforms for art criticism.

Art historians have traditionally considered historic and stylistic changes visually easier to track than changes in discourse and thinking about art. That is where the appellation of Đổi Mới in the arts becomes more problematic, particularly if one thinks of Đổi Mới as political reform in the sense of open and "free" expression. There are still sensitive issues pertaining to the rules for displaying works in public. Take, for example, the censorship of the 2007 sculptural work by Trương Tân (b. 1963) that, albeit elliptically, portrayed the police as corrupt and the

[37] Bùi Như Hương and Trần Hậu Tuấn, *Hội Họa Trẻ Việt Nam thập kỷ 90* (Young Vietnamese Painting), unpublished manuscript, 2000; Bùi Như Hương and Trần Hậu Tuấn, *Hội Họa Mới Việt Nam Thập kỷ 90* [New Vietnamese Art in the 1990s] (Hanoi: Fine Art Publishing House, 2001).

government as inept.[38] Some thirty years after the onset of reforms, exhibitions still require permissions from the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, and the government still regulates the public display of artists' works, even beyond the borders of the nation. This was recently demonstrated by the Vietnamese embassy in Tokyo's demand that several of artist Tiffany Chung's works on the historic routes of post-1975 Vietnamese refugees (*The Vietnam Exodus Project*) be removed from the 2017 Japan Foundation-supported exhibition *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now*, to which the exhibition organizers acceded.[39] Despite Vietnamese artists' inevitable participation in global trends associated with contemporary art, their experimentation with new mediums and processes of research and production is not necessarily indicative of a changed relationship to the official structures of the Vietnamese art world. From this perspective, Đổi Mới as an indicator of reform is fraught. While most artists are able to create a vast array of works without intense governmental scrutiny, the suppression of artworks by Trương Tân and Tiffany Chung may prompt the question of whether Đổi Mới in the arts has really taken place.

In the late 1980s, no artists were asking such questions. The 1987 pronouncement, for example, had given artists the impression that they had free reign over the artistic field. Outside observers wrote numerous essays describing how all art in Vietnam was presently about free

[38] *Hidden Beauty* (2007) was a large-scale sculpture of a diaper lined with pockets resembling those on police uniforms. During its display at an exhibition held at the Goethe Institut, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism ordered its removal even though the license had been approved prior. See Bill Hayton, "Nappy art work gets Vietnam ban," *BBC News, Hanoi*, 26 January 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/6303101.stm (accessed 27 July 2015).

[39] For the rationale behind the exhibition as a celebration of Japan-ASEAN relations, see *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now*, https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/about/press/2016/092.html (accessed July 27, 2018). For an account of the censorship of Tiffany Chung's work, see *CIMAM 2017 Singapore, Day 3: Perspective 08, Tiffany Chung*, 29 December 2017, https://vimeo.com/249056889 (accessed 27 July 2018).

expression and that the government lifted all restrictions on creativity. For these observers, journalists, curators and art critics, art under Đổi Mới was irrevocably open and free. But one has to historicize this context: the policy of Đổi Mới was written with 1980s criteria in mind. And written with local audiences in mind. Authorities could not have predicted the changes that were to take place in the future and therefore did not write their statements about the arts in relation to avant-garde experiments in pop, graffiti, installation, performance or video since those new media did not exist in Vietnam at the time. When they wrote about expanding the horizon of creativity, they meant varying approaches to painting and sculpture, allowing for abstraction and surrealism to enter into the national artistic vocabulary. They did not foresee the critical usage of mediums such as sculptural installation, such as Tân's allusion to corruption.

Since Đổi Mới was a policy that originated from the government it enabled "official" artists to enact changes in their practice, but there were other "unofficial" artists or independent artists, unsupported by the State, that experimented with mixed media techniques and controversial subject matter outside of the establishment. Do these count as Đổi Mới? Salon Natasha, for example, the independent art space formed out of the studio and home of late artist Vũ Dân Tân and his Russian born wife, Natalia Kraevskaia, mentioned above, that became a site for artist gatherings and creativity in the spirit of European-style Surrealism and Dada is often omitted from art history accounts of the 1990s because of its outsider status. But, its role in the development of contemporary art practices is currently being reconsidered since the donation of archival material pertaining to the Salon Natasha activities to Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong by Natalia Kraevskaia following her husband's death.[40] One might also list notable artists from the

[40] http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionFoldero/407 (accessed 18 October 2015)

Vietnamese diaspora, such as Dinh Q. Lê (b. 1968), who returned to Vietnam and became established as a prominent global artist through high-profile institutional exhibitions and biennials. Yet Lê is an artist who lives and makes work in Vietnam, only to be exhibited outside of Vietnam due to his work's attention to such sensitive issues as the Vietnam War and its aftermaths.[41] In some ways he continues to be considered an outsider artist by the state due to his status as a Việt Kiều, which has occluded his presence in national accounts or even some private and public collections of "Vietnamese Contemporary Art," or the possibility for him to teach at the state universities.[42] Nonetheless, he and other returned diasporic artists have played major roles in shaping platforms for education, collectivity, exhibition, and international exchange in Ho Chi Minh City through such 'outsider' or alternative spaces like Sàn Art.[43]

CONCLUSION

Thirty years after its formal embrace, Đổi Mới is widely seen in Vietnam as an unfinished if not stalled process. Looking back to the 1990s, Đổi Mới in Vietnamese art may not necessarily have been about reform or change from within, but about the outside world paying attention to Vietnam and Vietnamese artists beginning to embrace the opportunity to look

[41] For example, Lê's *Damaged Gene* project was a 1998 public installation at a Ho Chi Minh City marketplace that staged – among other wares – clothing for conjoined twin babies, alluding to the birth defects that resulted from environmental contamination as a result of Agent Orange. For more on this see Pamela N. Corey, "Beyond yet Toward Representation: Diasporic Artists and Craft as Conceptualism in Contemporary Southeast Asia," *Journal of Modern Craft* 9, no. 2 (July 2016): 161-81.

[42] For example, diasporic artists are not included in the purview of the Witness Collection, a formidable collection of modern and contemporary Vietnamese art initiated by founder and executive director Adrian Jones in 1987 (http://witnesscollection.com/, accessed 27 July 2018).

[43] See Viet Le, "Many Returns: Contemporary Vietnamese Diasporic Artists-Organizers in Ho Chi Minh City," in *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, eds. Nora Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asian Program Publications, 2012), pp. 85-116.

outward. This was an inevitable outcome of global integration more so than of Đổi Mới. There were new forms of experimentation largely as a result of the expanded mobilities and opportunities for exchange enabled by Đổi Mới, but reform - in the sense of renovating the official infrastructure and institutions in which artists are taught, practice and exhibit their works inside the country - is little changed today. It is still important not to give short shrift to the significance of the 1990s in permitting artists to take a first major step outside the constraints of Socialist Realism. In some ways, paintings from the 1990s may not appear so radically different from the styles and themes that were prominent in the 1980s or 1970s, or in the case of the south, the 1960s. Bùi Xuân Phái's streets from the 1970s or even Đặng Thụy Khuê's (b. 1946) cubist painting of a wounded soldier from the early 1980s seem at home amidst Đặng Xuân Hòa's household objects from 1994 and Trần Lưu Hậu's (b. 1928) flowers. In Ho Chi Minh City, the abstract paintings of Tạ Tỵ (1922-2004) formally relate to Nguyễn Trung's mixed-media paintings from 2010. Before the 1990s, artists primarily had only each other to emulate, as most artists were unaware of contemporary art movements elsewhere. For this reason, Vietnamese art in the 1990s appears today as a complete antithesis to what was happening in the rest of the world. In 1991, while Jeff Koons was exhibiting provocative images of himself and his wife in a New York Gallery, Nguyễn Quân was causing a stir in showing his porcelain-like surrealist images of female figures. Even the artists in Salon Natasha were experimenting with paper cut-outs and political pop imagery in the style of the 1920s and 1960s rather than looking to the conceptual practices that were fashionable in New York circles. Perhaps as a reaction to what the West saw as the death of art at the dawn of the age of Globalization in the aftermath of the 1989 groundbreaking exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre in Paris*, tourists in Hanoi were enchanted by the neo-expressionistic landscapes of Vietnamese painters. Color and abstraction seemed new

in Hanoi or revived in Ho Chi Minh City and that was cause for celebration. Just when the rest of the world had given up on figurative art, painting made a brief comeback in the form of Vietnamese art.

An opportunity to look back at the 1990s artists who had made an impact on the local and international art scene was created with a recent exhibition titled *Chancing Modern* and curated by a young curator, Lê Thuận Uyên, that took place in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City of work by the Gang of Five, mentioned earlier. The Hanoi exhibition, held at the former national film studio on Thụy Khuê street, consisted of recent paintings by the five artists: Đặng Xuân Hòa, Hà Trí Hiếu, Trần Lương, Phạm Quang Vinh, and Hồng Việt Dũng. The Ho Chi Minh City version, held at the Factory Contemporary Arts Centre in District 2, included pieces from the 1990s and a display of archival material. Although the group had only exhibited together a couple of times, their contribution to the artistic moment has had a lasting impact on the art community's memory. The exhibition curator Lê Thuận Uyên wrote on the Factory Contemporary Arts Centre's web page that the artists were "in the right time at the right place" in that they "opened new horizons for a richer vocabulary that inclined towards depicting personal emotions and individual perceptions," in contrast with the collective spirit of Socialist-Realism. [44] The two exhibitions received a lot of attention and were attended by a large portion of the artistic community across different generations as well as visitors from abroad, such as the Editor-in-chief of *Asian Art News*, Ian Findlay-Brown, and others who came to reminisce about this transitional period when young artists, hungry for change, dared to break from the status quo.

Yet while some observers see the 1990s as the onset of contemporary art in Vietnam, one cannot attribute the birth of contemporary art solely to Đổi Mới. The gradual opening of the

[44] http://factoryartscentre.com/en/event/gang-of-five-chancing-modern/ (accessed 28 July 2018).

country to tourism allowed artists access to the outside world which may have enabled a wider array of changes in artistic practices than the official Đổi Mới policy. Unquestionably, the sense and reality of accelerating processes of globalization in the 1990s animated qualitative changes in the socio-economic structures that facilitate and even produce "contemporary art" around the world. In this context, artists expressed an ambivalent relationship to its very conditions of production, often embracing new routes of mobility and access to art markets while at the same time critiquing the growing social and economic disparities and the cultural impacts of neoliberal development. As such, while the relationship between "Vietnamese art" and "globalization" has taken different forms throughout history,[45] there have been particular nuances in this relationship within the last two decades that have been glossed over by the perceptions of Đổi Mới mentioned prior. One way to better understand the nature of the changes indexed by Đổi Mới is by looking at the development of contemporary art as historical process, its contextual and shaping apparatuses, and its chief actors, both at home and abroad, revealing that the impact of the economic reforms on the visual arts were felt differently in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

[45] It can be argued that art from Vietnam has had a long history of being "global." If one stretches the modern borders of the geo-body back to the first millennium BCE, the bronze drums of the Đông Sơn culture based in the Red River delta were valuable objects of status and ritual use distributed throughout the Southeast Asian mainland and archipelago. In the 14th and 15th centuries Vietnamese blue and white ceramic wares were exported to ports as far as the Middle East and Japan. Artisanal objects and handicrafts were circulated and displayed at early 20th-century colonial expositions in France and later in U.S. domestic markets during the Cold War era, both instances framed through paradigms of cultural preservation and economic development. Artists from the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1945-1975) participated in a Soviet-Eastern bloc network of art education and exchange. While the term global describes imbrication and movement within worldwide networks, the understanding of globalization tied to Đổi Mới is one grounded in its current socio-economic dimensions, as part and parcel of post-Cold War processes of neoliberalization and the global reach of information technologies, collapsing time and space at an unprecedented level in history.